DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 629 CS 505 158

AUTHOR Berryman-Fink, Cynthia; Brunner, Claire
TITLE The Effects of Sex of Actor and Target on Interpersonal Conflict Management Styles.
PUB DATE 8 Nov 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (71st, Denver, CO, November 7-10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administration; *Communication Research; Comparative Analysis; *Conflict Resolution; Employer Employee Relationship; *Females; *Interpersonal Communication; *Males; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Conflict Management; *Management Styles

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore how males and females differ in their use of interpersonal conflict management styles. Subjects were 71 male and 76 female students from an introductory interpersonal communication course at a large midwestern state university. They were instructed to think of an important relationship with either an opposite-sex or same-sex person while completing the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument. Subjects were divided into subject or actor and target dyads, both male, both female, and mixed. Overall means for each of the five conflict-handling modes provide the ranking of the most-used to least-used styles: compromising, avoiding, collaborating, accommodating, and competing. The results indicated that males are more likely than females to compete in conflicts, and females are more likely than males to compromise in conflicts. Also, subjects of both sexes were more likely to use the accommodating style when managing a conflict with a female target. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED264629

THE EFFECTS OF SEX OF ACTOR AND TARGET ON INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

by

Cynthia Berryman-Fink

and

Claire Brunner

Cynthia Berryman-Fink (Ph.D., 1978, Bowling Green State University) is an Associate Professor of Communication, University of Cincinnati, Ohio, 45221.

Claire Brunner (Ph.D., 1984, The Ohio State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication, University of Cincinnati, Ohio 45221.

Presented at Speech Communication Association, November 8, 1985, Denver, Colorado.

CS 505158

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Cynthia Berryman-Fink

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

THE EFFECTS OF SEX OF ACTOR AND TARGET

ON INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

This study investigated the effects of subject sex and target sex on preferred conflict management styles. Results indicated that males scored higher than females on the competing style while females scored higher than males on the compromising style. Subjects were more likely to use the accommodating style with a female target. Implications of these findings are discussed.

THE EFFECTS OF SEX OF ACTOR AND TARGET ON INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Communication theorists have replaced the perception that interpersonal conflict is negative and avoidable with the current view of conflict as an irevitable and potentially valuable aspect of relationships. Because of this change in orientation, there has developed a considerable body of research on strategies and styles for effectively managing interpersonal conflict.[1] While this research indicates a consensus on the types of conflict management styles, it reveals inconsistencies on how the use of the styles correlate with demographic, personality, or situational variables. One such variable is sex of conflicting parties. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the effect of sex of actor and target on interpersonal conflict management styles.

A five-category scheme for interpersonal conflict-handling behavior seems to be the prevalent model. First introduced by Blake and Mouton,[2] the scheme incorporates two dimensions of conflict behavior: (1) concern for personal goals (assertiveness) and (2) concern for the relationship (cooperativeness). These two dimensions, when graphed onto a matrix, combine to produce the five styles. While terminology for the five conflict modes has varied somewhat among researchers,[3] the most common labels are: competing (forcing or dominating); accommodating (appeasing, obliging, or smoothing); avoiding (withdrawal or flight); collaborating (problem-solving or integrating) and compromising (sharing).

According to a number of authors, an individual uses a preferred or dominant style of behavior in interpersonal conflict situations.[4] This style will be used habitually across all conflicts. Putnam and Wilson question this trait-like approach and favor a contingency or situational model of conflict management behavior.[5] They indicate a number of factors influencing one's choice of conflict-handling behavior in organizational contexts, including the amount of conflict, the organizational structure, the personal-cultural factors of the individual, and the relationship between the source and the target.

Current conceptualizations of communication would question the notion of a preferred conflict management style independent of situational or relationship constraints. Rather, it would seem reasonable to expect a complexity of factors influencing one's behavior in interpersonal conflicts. Indeed, research shows that conflict management behavior can vary according to the sex of the actor,[6] the sex of the partner,[7] the psychological sex-role identity of the actor,[8] personal needs,[9] the relative power in the relationship,[10] behavioral attributions or expected behavior from the partner,[11] the degree of liking for the partner,[12] and personality factors.[13]

The literature on conflict management style as a function of the sex of the actor and target is replete with inconsistent findings. A number of studies report significant differences in the conflict behavior of males and females. Roloff and Greenberg studied high school students' intentions to use a given mode of conflict resolution. They found males reporting a greater likelihood of using antisocial modes of conflict behavior, such as physical aggression, revenge, and verbal aggression.

Females reported using two modes more often than the males; prosocial behavior (feeling sorry, forgiving, talking, thinking, and behaving) and regression behavior (crying, pleading, praying, worrying, pouting, feeling guilty, and running away).[14] Imler's research with hospital management personnel,[15] as well as research by Kilmann and Thomas[16] found males to be more dominating and less compromising than females in conflict situations. Rahim, when comparing the self-reported conflict behavior of 50 male and 50 female executives from a variety of industries, found females were more integrating, avoiding, and compromising, but less obliging than males.[17]

Other studies report no clear-cut sex difference in the use of conflict-handling behavior. Rubin and Brown's summary of sex differences in cooperation and competition in bargaining games reported contradictory results, but suggested that females may be more sensitive to relationship cues while males orient themselves to goal maximization.[18] Renwick studied subordinates' perceptions of their own responses to the conflict behaviors of their managers in an organizational setting and found no sex differences.[19] In a study of managers from five organizations, Shockley-Zalabak reported no sex differences in strength of preference for five conflict styles.[20] A study of 30 couples' behavior in marital conflicts found no difference between husbands and wives in the types of conflict resolution strategies employed.[21]

Relatively few researchers have investigated individuals' conflict-handling behavior as a function of the sex of the target. Baxter and Shepherd found that sex of the target was not a salient feature for determining appropriate conflict management styles.[22] Zammuto et al.

investigated both sex of the actor and the target in a study of superior-subordinate behavior in conflict situations. They reported that both male and female subordinates were less likely to withdraw from a conflict with a woman supervisor. Additionally, both male and female subordinates were less likely to use a confronting style in conflicts with male supervisors.[23]

Thus, the literature shows inconsistencies when examining interpersonal conflict management strategies as a function of the sex of the actor and the target. The purpose of this research is threefold: (1) to investigate whether males and females differ in their use of conflict management styles; (2) to investigate whether individuals use different styles when in conflict with males or females; and (3) to investigate whether actor sex and target sex interact to affect conflict management styles. A relational approach to communication would predict that the relationship between the conflicting parties (in this case, the gender relationship), would affect their conflict-handling behavior. Perhaps males and females do not differ in their overall use of conflict styles, but behave differently based on whether they are in conflict with a same-sex or opposite-sex other. This possibility may account for the lack of consistent results in the literature on sex differences in conflict styles.

Based on a review of the literature on gender and conflict, there is insufficient evidence to support specific directional hypotheses regarding differences between males and females, differences as a function of target sex, or differences in conflict styles used in same-sex or opposite-sex dyads. Likewise, it is difficult to predict which conflict styles may contribute to any observed differences between gender groups. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Do males and females differ in their use of interpersonal conflict management styles?

RQ2: Do individuals differ in their use of interpersonal conflict management styles with male and female targets?

RQ3: Is there an interacting between sex of the actor and sex of the target which affects the actor's use of interpersonal conflict management styles?

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

Subjects included 147 students (71 male and 76 female) from the introductory interpersonal communication course at a large Midwestern metropolitan state university. They were instructed to think of an important relationship with either an opposite-sex or same-sex person while completing the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.[24] Frequencies in the four cells created by combinations of subject sex and target sex variables were as follows: (1) male subject and male target, n = 36; (2) male subject and female target, n = 35; (3) female subject and male target, n = 40; and (4) female subject and female target, n = 36. The questionnaire booklet was completed in class during the first week of the course to control for instruction on conflict management techniques. Subjects ranged from age 18-24 and only one subject was married.

Dependent Measure

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument has 30 pairs of statements describing modes of handling conflict. Each mode is paired with the other four modes an equal number of times. Subjects select the statement in each pair corresponding to their actual behavior in a conflict situation. Summing the number of statements selected for each mode provides a profile of conflict management style.

Previously reported test-retest reliabilities for this measure have ranged from .61 to .68. The internal consistencies of items measuring each of the five modes (coefficient alpha) have ranged from .43 to .71. The reliabilities (coefficient alpha) obtained in this study are as follows: competing = .79, collaborating = .50, compromising = .42, avoiding = .51, and accommodating = .60. While these scores are moderate, they are higher than those reported for four alternate conflict-style instruments.[25] Semantic differential studies have indicated this instrument's close correspondence to subjective dimensions used by individuals in conflict situations.[26] Because the problem of social desirability has been apparent in many measures of conflict style, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument was specifically designed to minimize the effect of social desirability response bias.[27]

Data Analysis

Due to the ipsative nature of the data obtained from the paired-forced-choice format of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) would have resulted in a singular matrix, rendering multivariate statistics impossible to compute.[28] Therefore, a series of five two-way (sex of subject and sex of target) univariate analyses of variance (one for each of the conflict styles) were computed.

RESULTS

Overall means for each of the five conflict-handling modes provide the ranking of the most-used to least-used styles. They are: (1) compromising (7.11); (2) avoiding (6.48); (3) collaborating and accommodating (both at 5.93); and (5) competing (4.57). The following results are presented according to specific research questions.

RQ1: Do males and females differ in their use of interpersonal conflict management styles?

On the competing style, the mean for the males (5.15) was significantly higher than the mean for the females (4.01, $F = 4.97$, $p < .05$). On the compromising style, females obtained a significantly higher mean (7.51) than did the males (6.68, $F = 5.77$, $p < .05$).

RQ2: Do individuals differ in their use of interpersonal conflict management styles with male and female targets?

On the accommodating style, subjects scored significantly higher when the target was female (6.38) than when the target was male (5.50, $F = 4.46$, $p < .05$).

RQ3: Is there an interaction between sex of the actor and sex of the target which affects the actor's use of interpersonal conflict management styles?

Results indicated no significant interactions between sex of subject and target in the use of conflict management styles.

DISCUSSION

This research finds that males and females differ in two significant ways when selecting conflict management styles: (1) Males are more likely than females to compete in conflicts. (2) Females are more likely than males to compromise in conflicts. These findings are consistent with a number of studies of gender effects in conflict management behavior. Roloff and Greenberg have reported high school males preferring aggressive modes of conflict behavior;[29] Imler[30] and Kilmann and Thomas[31] have found males to be more dominating and less compromising than females in conflict-handling behavior; and Rahim has indicated female executives to be more compromising than male executives.[32]

That males in this study were more competitive and females more compromising corroborates that sex-role literature in a number of areas. Specifically, research on aggression, reward allocation, and task versus interpersonal orientation would support such results. Studies of aggression consistently have found males to be more aggressive than females.[33] The competing style of conflict management is the most aggressive style in that it shows a high concern for self and a low concern for others. Compromising is a less aggressive style in that it shows a sharing of concern for both self and others.

Studies of reward allocation have revealed that women allocate fewer rewards to themselves than men do.[34] Thus, we might expect males to use a competitive approach in order to maximize outcomes (rewards) for themselves in conflicts while females likely would compromise, that is, allocate rewards equitably or share outcomes in conflict situations.

Perhaps the most parsimonious explanation for sex differences in conflict management styles rests with the divergent orientations males and females bring to conflict situations. Much literature has shown females to be interpersonally-oriented and males task-oriented in a variety of contexts.[35] As Rubin and Brown point out in their review of bargaining literature, males seek to maximize individual gain while females seek satisfying relationship outcomes in conflicts.[36] Since the competing style shows high concern for personal goals and low concern for the relationship, we would expect males to select that style. Likewise, females using the compromising style, which focuses on both the goals and the relationship, is consistent with their interpersonal role.

On the question of whether target sex influences one's conflict behavior, this study reports one significant result. Individuals tend to accommodate more to females than to males. Sex-role literature generally and conflict-management literature specifically provide no reasonable explanation for this finding. Subsequent researchers might explore possible mediating factors such as the relative power of the conflicting parties, the behavioral attributions toward the target, the history conflict strategies in the relationship, the salience of the conflict issue, or personality factors. Since subjects in this study completed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument in relation to generalized conflicts in an important relationship they were asked to recall, the possible effects of the nature or salience of either the relationship or conflict issues are unknown. Subjects imagining a relationship with their mother or female boss, for example, may have reported using an accommodating style based on the power, not the sex, of the target. If subjects imagined conflicts with females on issues in which they had little ego-involvement or investment in the outcome, they may have selected the accommodating style, as a result. Clearly, there is a host of factors in addition to gender affecting conflict behavior.

On the question of interaction between sex of actor and sex of target, this study finds no relationship. Perhaps one's own sex, psychological sex-role identity, personal needs, or personality traits are stronger determinants of conflict-handling behavior than is the gender composition of the relationship.

Finally, when examining the most-used conflict style across the entire sample, we find the compromising mode to be most prevalent. Other research has indicated the collaborating style as the most prevalent and the most desirable mode.[37] Clearly, both collaborating and compromising are perceived as positive styles because of their moderate to high concern for both the self and the other. Both parties "win" with these two styles, while someone must "lose" in the avoiding, accommodating, or competing styles. As Thomas and Kilmann suggest,[38] social desirability probably affects all studies, not only self-report measures, of conflict measurement style. Individuals may report using the styles which society deems most appropriate. Yet, there may be a correspondence between the social desirability of the conflict-handling modes and their actual occurrence. That is, people tend to behave in ways which society encourages in conflict situations.

This investigation found significant differences between males and females in the use of competing and compromising behavior in conflict situations. It also found that individuals accommodate significantly more with females than with males in conflicts. These results provide additional information on the relationship of gender and conflict management behavior. To fully understand the complex nature of interpersonal behavior in conflicts, researchers systematically must examine personality, relationship, and contextual factors as they affect self-reported and behavioral indices of conflict management styles. Only after we understand what motivates individuals to select certain behaviors in conflicts can we deal with the effectiveness of strategies for managing interpersonal conflicts.

NOTES

[1] See, for instance, Robert R. Blake & Jane S. Mouton, The Managerial Grid (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1964); Jay Hall, Conflict Management Survey: A Survey on One's Characteristic Reaction to and Handling of Conflicts Between Himself and Others (Conroe, TX: Teleometrics International, 1969); P. R. Lawrence & J. W. Lorsch, Organization and Environment (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1967); Linda L. Putnam & Charmaine E. Wilson, "Communicative Strategies in Organizational Conflicts: Reliability and Validity of a Measurement Scale. In M. Burgoon, Communication Yearbook 6 (Beverly Hills: Sage Publishers, 1982); 629-652; Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Tuxedo, NY: Xicom, Inc., 1974).

[2] Blake & Mouton, 1964.

[3] See, for instance, Hall, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; and Thomas & Kilmann, 1974.

[4] See, for instance, Blake & Mouton, 1964; Allen C. Filley, Interpersonal Conflict Resolution (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975); J. H. Frost & William W. Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1978); Hall, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; and Thomas & Kilmann, 1974.

[5] Putnam & Wilson, 1982.

[6] See, for instance, J. R. Imler, The Effects of Occupational Category, Organizational Level, Organizational Size, Sex, and Conflict Opponent on the Conflict-Handling Styles of Hospital Management Personnel. Unpublished MBA Thesis, Youngstown State University, 1980; Ralph H. Kilmann & Kenneth W. Thomas, "Developing a Forced-Choice Measure of Conflict-Handling Behavior: The "MODE" Instrument," Educational and Psychological Measurement, 37 (1977), 309-325; M. Afzalur Rahim, "A Measure of Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict," Academy of Management Journal, 26 (1983), 368-376; and Michael E. Roloff & Bradley S. Greenberg, "Sex Differences in Choice of Modes of Conflict Resolution in Real-Life and Television," Communication Quarterly, 27 (1979), 3-12.

[7] R. F. Zammuto, M. London, & K. M. Rowland, "Effects of Sex on Commitment and Conflict Resolution," Journal of Applied Psychology, 64 (1979), 227-231.

[8] Leslie A. Baxter & Tara L. Shepherd, "Sex-Role Identity, Sex of Other, and Affective Relationship as Determinants of Interpersonal Conflict-Management Styles," Sex Roles, 4 (1978), 813-825.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

[9] See, for instance, R. Ross & Sue DeWine, Interpersonal Needs and Communication in Conflict: Do Soft Words Win Hard Hearts? Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, 1984; Kenneth W. Thomas, Conflict and Conflict Management. In M. Dunnette (Ed.), The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), 889-935; and D. N. Leart, The Relationship of Teachers' and Principals' Interpersonal Relations Orientations and Prefererces for Conflict Management Techniques. Doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester. Dissertation Abstracts International, 1972, 33, 3233A. (University Microfilm No. 72-28, 815).

[10] See, for instance, R. L. Kahn, D. M. Wolfe, P. R. Quinn, J. D. Snoek, & R. A. Rosenthal, Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity (New York: Wiley, 1964); Thomas, 1976; and Zammuto et al., 1979.

[11] See, for instance, Alan L. Sillars, "Attributions and Communication in Roommate Conflicts," Communication Monographs, 47 (1980), 180-200; Alan L. Sillars, Attributions and Interpersonal Conflict Resolution. In J. H. Harvey, W. I. Ickes, & R. F. Kidd (Eds.), New Directions in Attribution Research (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 279-305; and Kenneth W. Thomas & L. R. Pordy, "Toward an 'Intent' Model of Conflict Management Among Principal Parties," Human Relations, 30 (1977), 1089-1102.

[12] Baxter & Shepherd, 1978.

[13] See, for instance, E. C. Bell & R. N. Blakeney, "Personality Correlates of Conflict Resolution Modes," Human Relations, 30 (1977), 849-857; R. E. Jones & B. Melcher, "Personality and Preference for Modes of Conflict Resolution," Human Relations, 35 (1982) 649-658; Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann, "Interpersonal Conflict-Handling Behavior as Reflections of Jungian Personality Dimensions," Psychological Reports, 37 (1975), 971-980; and Charles E. Watkins, "An Analytic Model of Conflict," Speech Monographs, 41 (1974), 1-5.

[14] Roloff & Greenberg, 1979.

[15] Imler, 1980.

[16] Kilmann & Thomas, 1977.

[17] Rahim, 1983.

[18] Jeffrey Z. Rubin & B. R. Brown. The Social Psychology of Bargaining and Negotiation (New York: Academic Press, 1975).

[19] Patricia Renwick, "The Effects of Sex Differences on the Perception and Management of Superior-Subordinate Conflict: An Exploratory Study," Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 19 (1977), 403-415.

[20] Pamela Schokley-Zalabak, "The Effects of Sex Differences on the Preference for Utilization of Conflict Styles of Managers in a Work Setting: An Exploratory Study," Public Personnel Management Journal, 10 (1981), 289-295.

[21] D. C. Bell, J. S. Chafetz, & L. H. Horn, "Marital Conflict Resolution: A Study of Strategies and Outcomes," Journal of Family Issues, 3 (1982) 111-131.

[22] Baxter & Shepherd, 1978.

[23] Zammuto, et al., 1979.

[24] Thomas & Kilmann, 1974.

[25] Thomas & Kilmann, 1978.

[26] T. L. Ruble & Kenneth W. Thomas, "Support for a Two-Dimensional Model of Conflict Behavior," Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 16 (1976), 143-155.

[27] See, for instance, Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann, "The Social Desirability Variable in Organizational Research, an Alternative Explanation for Reported Findings," Academy of Management Journal, 18 (1975), 741-752.

[28] Fred N. Kerlinger. Foundations of Behavioral Research (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

[29] Roloff & Greenberg, 1979.

[30] Imler, 1980.

[31] Kilmann & Thomas, 1977.

[32] Rahim, 1983.

[33] See, for instance, K. B. Hoyenga & K. T. Hoyenga. The Question of Sex Differences: Psychological, Cultural, and Biological Differences (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); J. W. Kalat, Biological Psychology (Belmont, CA: Wasdworth, 1981); Eleanor Maccoby & Carol N. Jacklin, The Psychology of Sex Differences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); and Judy C. Pearson, Gender and Communication (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1985).

[34] B. Major & J. Adams, "Role of Gender, Interpersonal Orientation, and Self-Preservation in Distributive-Justice Behavior," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45 (1983), 598-608; B. Major & Kay Deaux, "Individual Differences in Justice Behavior." In J. Greenberg & R. I. Cohen (Eds.), Equity and Justice in Social Behavior (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

[35] John E. Baird, "Sex Differences in Group Communication: A Review of Relevant Research," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 179-192.

[36] Rubin & Brown, 1975.

[37] Thomas & Kilmann, Academy of Management Journal, 1975.